DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 655 CE 051 358

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TITLE Using Technical Writing To Enhance Adult Student Self-Esteem.
PUB DATE Oct 88
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Conference "Teaching Adults: Myths and Realities" (Cincinnati, OH, October 7-8, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Educational Benefits; Postsecondary Education; *Reentry Students; *Self Esteem; *Technical Writing; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Short, intensive technical writing classes have been found to have a very positive effect on adult personality, especially in the area of self-esteem. Over the course of several years, groups of high school-educated adult learners who entered college after being out of school for years were found to have their anxieties about reentering school alleviated substantially after they had completed short courses in technical writing. Task-oriented technical writing assignments encouraging students to make use of such concepts as layout, graphics, study, and audience need were found to have the following positive effects in adult learners: a significant increase in self-confidence, an overall improvement in communication ability, a reduction in being manipulated by others, improved analytical ability, and increased control over life circumstances. (MN)

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USING TECHNICAL WRITING TO ENHANCE ADULT STUDENT SELF-ESTEEM

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After years in the classroom, we have noted that a short but intense technical writing class may positively affect adult personality, especially in the area of self-esteem. This opinion is supported by literature. We have observed that the following changes in adult personality occur during the technical writing course which we teach:

A. <u>A significant increase in students' confidence</u>. Most of our students are high school educated adults who have been out of school for years. When they enter college, they describe themselves as apprehensive and often act that way in class. This presence of anxiety in a given situation parallels the pattern of anxiety disorders related to low self-esteem. If the anxiety associated with the situation can be reduced, student performance will improve. The new adult students exhibit a low confidence level in their ability to write, and express their inability to successfully cope with job demands. This lack of self-esteem

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among educated adults may stem from past failure at writing within the academic setting and is important because self-esteem is closely related to academic success.

The student's level of self-confidence is not increased when the student produces a poor product. Positive self-regard may be increased by an activity in which the adult student produces a successful product.

Once the nature of technical writing is understood it is quite easy to teach and do. Technical writing allows for unlimited creativity in the concepts of white space, layout, graphics, style, word choice, and order of ideas as related to audience needs to enable a successful action. One of the basic developmental processes of the mind is learning through imitation. Imitation is effective because it does not rely solely on language, but rather on action. Imitation is task oriented. The relationship of imitation and technical writing is clear. Imitation is not just duplication of action. It involves imitation of principles. Because the nature of technical writing is such that it is easy to duplicate a successful written product, technical writing is a basic imitation type of self-esteem enhancement tool which allows the student to produce successful products. This is because standard outlines are available for the writers to follow for any type of technical

report. The quality of the writing is judged by the behavior of the reader. If the student writes instructions about how to make coffee, and the reader makes coffee, the writer was successful. The adult student, who may never have had consistent success in his life, has succeeded and knows that he can do so again. This success improves one's confidence. Research has proven that success breeds success, and this is important to the adult student who has been out of school for many years.

B. An overall improvement in communication ability. The use of technical writing tasks may improve communication between student and teacher more so than other English classes. This is due in large measure to the contrasts between how the student is treated in a typical English class and how the student is treated in a technical writing class. The typical student in an English class is treated as if he knows nothing about the mysterious field of writing. There exists a vague social disapproval when someone takes a class in what the individual does every day for most of their life; namely, write. Furthermore, one could argue that in most English departments there exists a sense of "guardian of the garden" which proposes that writing is based upon general and ill-defined feelings expressed through ever-changing grading rules. The result is that the student is rarely correct while the English teacher is always correct. This situation hardly instills confidence in the new adult college student.

C. A reduction in being manipulated by others. Language is both a defensive mechanism against those who manipulate us and our primary means of controlling the environment. We believe that adult students with low self-esteem are also people who are frequently manipulated by others. Sending new adult students through a technical writing course which teaches the use of language may be of value to a student who is consistently manipulated. We have seen that students who become successful become more assertive regardless of past poor grades in English classes.

D. Improved analytical ability. Improving analytical ability enables students to better understand their environment. One of the important failings in adult students with low self-esteem is their failure to recognize any problem which, if solved, would improve their situation. This astounding jump in the ability to "see" occurs in every technical writing class we teach.

E. Increased control over one's life. Through the study of technical writing, words become instruments rather than threats. Words become specific rather than fuzzy. The adult student's perception of words changes through the study of technical writing. Sentences are designed and controlled rather than just happening. This sense of control is essential to positive self-esteem in the adult student.

We suggest that technical writing can be a useful tool in improving the self-esteem of the adult college student. Much research needs to be done in this area. Empirical data regarding personality changes in technical writing courses needs to be gathered. Test programs need to be developed and evaluated. We hope that we have been able to share our vision to improve adult success in college.

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